

## **Chapter 4. USING SPECIAL TECHNIQUES TO ENHANCE PARTICIPATION**

### **B. CHANGING A MEETING APPROACH**

People are almost always “too busy” to attend meetings. Low attendance occurs even when agencies have made heroic efforts to get people involved in regularly scheduled meetings or well-publicized special events. Practitioners feel like Sisyphus, endlessly rolling the stone uphill. When people do turn out, the meetings themselves may seem stale or lifeless and their discussions unfocused or of little use. Repeated discussions of narrow issues often frustrate participants, especially if they do not lead to progress. Yet meetings remain a basic, low-cost way for people to get involved in transportation planning and project development. In one room, during one limited time period, participants represent many viewpoints and interests, including those that have been traditionally underrepresented.

A modest shake-up can inject new life into a dying public involvement program. For instance, a change in meeting place often changes people’s perspectives as well—and may attract new participants because the new setting is more convenient or interesting. Changing the dynamics of the way people interact at meetings allows different viewpoints to emerge. Alternating group leadership or assuming different roles also helps spark new enthusiasm and fresh thinking. Novelty, however, becomes routine if repeated, and change for the sake of change is seldom effective. Diverse meeting approaches should be purposeful elements of an overall plan or respond to identified problems.

Before changing a meeting approach, an agency can work with participant advisors to shape a more effective program and give them greater ownership and pride in the process. If they do not like a new approach, participants may offer alternatives more suitable to the community’s needs.

Rather than giving in to discouragement over low turnout, then, agencies can take special measures to boost attendance and improve the quality and productivity of meetings. The following techniques—some tried-and-true, others more innovative—offer several options for changing a meeting approach and getting more people involved in meaningful ways:

- Improving meeting attendance;
- Role playing;
- Site visits; and
- Non-traditional meeting places and events.

## IMPROVING MEETING ATTENDANCE

### What does this mean?

**For many agencies, getting people to attend meetings is challenging, if not daunting.** Often, despite an agency's concerted efforts, people simply do not come, and the level of effort seems unjustified by the results. Low attendance is especially common for State and Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) planning activities that do not focus on specific project details. How can agencies summon their resources to get more people meaningfully involved in the process of transportation planning and project development?

**A first step is to understand why people do not participate.** They offer numerous reasons for not attending transportation meetings:

- They are not aware a meeting is taking place;
- They receive inadequate notice;
- They have other commitments;
- They have a negative perception of the sponsoring agency;
- Public comments are not taken seriously;
- Decisions have already been made behind closed doors;
- Meetings are too time-consuming or boring; and
- Meeting sites are too far away, inconvenient, or inaccessible.

Underneath these very real and very valid reasons lies a deep-seated cynicism: generally, people today do not believe their input makes a difference.

**An agency's fundamental weapon in countering such cynicism is to make public input count in decision-making**—to “walk the talk,” as popular wisdom has it—and to let people know that expressing their opinions has a real, tangible effect. People participate if an agency offers meaningful opportunities, plans strategies and logistics carefully, and has a history of using the output to make better plans and projects. According to a telephone survey of 2,000 households in Colorado, people want to provide more input into the “transportation decision-making process, *if they will be listened to...by officials.*”

**Good meeting attendance, then, is closely linked to an agency's responsiveness and receptivity,** commitment to the process of public involvement, careful advance planning, and good communication strategies. High turnout with productive results is possible. A Wisconsin Department of Transportation (DOT) survey indicated that several States were able to attract large numbers of participants in their last round of long-range plan updates. These included Wisconsin (7,500) and Florida and New Jersey (6,000 each).

### Why is improved meeting attendance desirable?

**High meeting attendance helps ensure a broader range of input.** This, in turn, enables staff to identify additional issues and see new perspectives. The more inclusive a process, the greater its credibility—and the more likely it is to produce usable input.

**Widespread participation enhances public awareness about a plan or project.** When people get involved in a meaningful exchange of ideas on transportation issues, they are likely to spread the word to friends and neighbors. It is also crucial when an elected body such as a legislature or MPO board must ratify a plan.

**Broad participation from the beginning of a process aids consensus-building at its end.** When people are instrumental in shaping the vision for a project or plan and have been involved in working

through issues and alternatives, they are more likely to be supportive of the final results. In Portland, Oregon, a recent 64-percent vote in favor of a bond to support extensions to the light rail system demonstrates the value of highly-inclusive planning. Several years prior to the election, a broad-based public involvement program began with the MPO's 50-year plan for the region, including numerous community meetings, focus groups, surveys of preferences, and speakers' bureaus. Information provided by participants was integrated by proponents and culminated in an extensive public information and meeting program immediately prior to the election.

**All community segments benefit from increased meeting attendance** because their interests and viewpoints have a greater probability of being voiced. These include elected officials; agencies; organizations; residents; businesses; minority, ethnic, low-income, and disabled constituents; and special interest groups that focus on specific issues such as freight; bikeways and trails; pedestrian safety; taxes; clean air; growth and development; and quality of life. Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA) invited key groups to an important meeting, prepared an agenda with specific time slots for each group to present its position, and sent the agenda to participants in advance.

### **What are the main keys to success ?**

**A positive and responsive agency attitude is essential.** This is reflected in the level of care, attention, clarity, sincerity, and honesty its staff displays in contacts with the public. Outreach efforts before, during, and after meetings are opportunities to assert a positive attitude and improve rapport with the public. The Environmental Defense Fund trains staff members who regularly deal with the public in the importance of a positive attitude. The Spokane, Washington, MPO makes special efforts to explain why its meetings are important and that the organization cares about what people have to say.

**It is important to stress that an agency involves people because their input is valued and useful.** New Jersey Transit, for instance, states, "It's not something we have to do, but rather something we want to do—to ensure that our services and products meet the public's expectations, to serve as a quality check on our performance, and to help us find answers and set priorities." The public quickly defects when an agency is engaging in public involvement simply because it is required to do so—and they will stay away.

**Equally important is an agency's record on translating community input into real decisions.** The National Resource and Defense Council advises that people will not attend meetings if they perceive that their views will not be heard. Many agencies confirm this. When the Portland, Oregon, MPO attracted more than 300 participants to a series of outreach meetings, it attributed the success to a "track record of credibility." The transit agency in Houston, Texas, believes the most important factor is "developing and nurturing a trusting relationship" between the agency and the public.

**Careful advance planning is crucial.** Good organization assures people that their time is not wasted and that the agency has a strong handle on what needs to be accomplished.

- **An agency clearly determines the meeting's purpose,** what needs it will fill, how it relates to the overall public involvement program and the larger transportation planning or project development effort, and how the results will be used. The more specific an agency's vision for the meeting, the more likely it will generate feedback that staff people can use.
- **The type of meeting, as well as its style, is based on this strategic assessment.** Agencies decide whether a meeting will emphasize information or interaction and explore the menu of options within these approaches. They also need to estimate the number of participants and consider break-out groups if a large audience is expected.
- **Agency staff identifies desired participants and their special needs.** Factors such as familiarity with the plan or project, the degree of sophistication, and the ability to understand

English all affect meeting planning. The agency also needs to determine which staff members and resource people need to take part, when, and in what roles.

- **Successful meetings have clear agendas**, including the purpose, discussion topics, types of activities, names of speakers, and overall schedule. For meetings on a corridor study in East Los Angeles, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) based its agenda on questions such as “What’s the project about?” “What’s its current status?” “What’s the time line?” “What are the criteria?” and “How can I give comments?”
- **Meeting times and locations optimize people’s ability to participate**—for instance, after work hours, in convenient neighborhood locations and comfortable settings conducive to interaction. Participants can be consulted beforehand about what times or dates are preferable. The Pennsylvania DOT holds meetings both during working hours and in the evening. The Wisconsin DOT finds that a 4:00–7:00 P.M. meeting time accommodates most people. The Cleveland, Ohio, MPO and the Minnesota DOT schedule their meetings from 5:00–7:00 P.M. The Ohio DOT has found that people in urban areas prefer night meetings, while rural residents prefer daytime. (See [Non-traditional Meeting Places and Events](#).)
- **Thoughtfully prepared and coordinated meeting materials convey the appropriate level and kind of information**. An agency must allow ample time for writing, editing, printing, and collating. Presentation materials are particularly important. Good visuals convey principal points, aid audience understanding of a plan or project, and encourage people to ask questions. (See [Public Information Materials](#).)
- **Sufficient notice well in advance of a meeting helps constituents set aside time in their schedule for preparation and attendance**. Mailed invitations can take the form of a “save-the-date” card or flier. The Kansas DOT sent out more than 5,000 fliers to invite people to 10 informational meetings on its statewide long-range plan. The Montana DOT sent 5,500 fliers that attracted 3,000 participants to its long-range planning meetings. Phoning and in some cases FAXING meeting notices are other possible approaches.

**Involving the community in planning a meeting enhances its chances for success.** Agencies can ask community groups about what issues to raise and what meeting dates and places are likely to draw people to participate. This consultation also helps determine an appropriate format, depending on the community’s traditions or preferences. This is particularly crucial when the community involves minorities and ethnic groups whose cultural attitudes strongly influence how they see and participate in a public process.

**Offering a variety of formats increases the chances of attracting participants** and demonstrates an agency’s intent to make it easy for the community to take part. States use a blend of topics and formats to attract broad involvement. The Montana DOT enlisted 3,000 participants in its long-range transportation plan through 6 open forums, 5 thematic forums, 9 open houses, and 7 forums with tribal governments. Over 7,500 people attended Wisconsin DOT meetings on its long-range plan: 16 forums, 9 informational meetings, 7 topical review meetings, 1 meeting with 40 statewide organizations, peer review meetings on subjects such as freight, 10 statewide groups, and 15 town meetings.

## What else helps?

**Agencies are experimenting with a broad range of strategies and approaches to attract more participants** and make the public involvement process more meaningful and productive. Some of their most successful ideas are discussed below.

- **Follow up a meeting notice by mail, phone, or FAX** to make sure it has been received and to stress the importance of attendance and input. The Los Angeles County MTA makes friendly

reminder phone calls to key leaders. The Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) in San Francisco sends FAXes to between 500 and 600 businesses.

- **Survey communication preferences** to find out what works best for the community. One “size” does not fit all. The Missouri DOT conducted a statewide survey asking, “How can we best communicate with you?” Results indicated that newsletters worked best for this audience and that electronic meetings were not preferred. (See [Public Opinion Surveys](#).)
- **Focus each meeting on a special issue.** If community members clearly see how the specific issue affects their lives, they more readily attend meetings. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation in Maryland organized a meeting around the relationship between transportation, affordable housing, and minority groups.
- **Do the legwork.** There’s no getting around it. The Houston transit agency’s community relations people know constituents and work the phones before meetings. They also place fliers on doorknobs. New Jersey Transit hired drug rehabilitation participants to distribute meeting announcements to downtown Newark shoppers.
- **Use other groups’ publications to announce meetings.** Sharing resources helps agencies reach a variety of potential participants cost-effectively. The Johnson County–Iowa City, Iowa, MPO has reached larger audiences this way. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation develops partnerships by interesting leaders from other organizations in its meetings and by publicizing them collaboratively.
- **List meetings in a calendar of events.** A little research can uncover numerous places where people look for information on what’s happening—for instance, in local newspaper weekly calendars or on public access television channels that offer community bulletin boards. MPOs in Seattle and San Francisco issue regular newsletters with a calendar of upcoming meetings and events for several months ahead. The Alaska DOT gets local clerks to list public involvement meetings on government calendars. (See [Media Strategies](#).)
- **Engage support through local schools.** Most parents give thoughtful consideration to materials they receive through their children’s school. The Portland, Maine, MPO and Los Angeles MTA send fliers home with school children. The Florida DOT created a special program for students to learn about its East–West Corridor Study by riding the Metro rail system and writing essays to express their views on the project.
- **Stir interest through name recognition tactics.** The more people see an attractive logo, easily-identifiable symbol or slogan, or “teaser,” the more likely they are to be curious about what’s behind it. To promote project name recognition for Miami’s East–West Corridor Study major investment study, the Florida DOT developed a sophisticated logo placed on widely-distributed calendars and business cards.
- **Establish information networks.** Word of mouth is a powerful tool. Houston’s transit agency uses “leadership groups” of residents and businesses that take direct responsibility for informing other people about transportation issues and meetings.
- **Offer low-cost meeting perks,** ranging from food and transportation to day care and entertainment for children. The Missoula, Montana, and Spokane, Washington, MPOs offer light food and beverages. The Pittsburgh MPO receives FAXed requests for the kinds of cookies it should serve. The San Diego MPO offers certain meetings in a luncheon setting. The Minnesota DOT provides box lunches for day-long meetings. New Jersey Transit offers entertainment and babysitters for children during selected meetings. The Alaska DOT offers transportation to some meeting sites.

- **Offer alternative modes of participating for individuals constrained by time or distance.** The Portland Metro, the Los Angeles MTA, and the Savannah MPO give the public opportunities to phone in comments regarding meeting topics. Technological advances increase the opportunities for participating via teleconferences or computer communication. Agencies sometimes use other techniques such as community surveys to assure input and yet conserve people's energy and time, then target meetings for a stage in the process when they will be particularly crucial.
- **Spark interest by featuring well-known experts or political candidates.** If well-publicized, the presence of prominent people enhances attendance. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation featured elected officials as key attractions. The Missouri DOT survey results indicated preferences for public meetings with elected officials as guests. The Kansas DOT achieved a high level of participation when it featured Alan Pisarski, author of *Commuting in America*, at a statewide workshop. The Alaska DOT holds meetings in the weeks before an election; when the candidates are scheduled to appear, the agency gets good turnout.
- **Feature agency board or staff members as guest speakers.** The active interest of high-level staff demonstrates the value an agency places on public input. Senior managers at the Oregon and Pennsylvania DOTs appear at meetings to enhance attendance. Los Angeles County MTA's chief executive officer frequently speaks at the agency's meetings. The Houston Transit Agency brings board meetings into the community every three months for a project and program status report. The Central Puget Sound RTA's board is directly involved in meetings to show residents their voices have value and their comments are not being "filtered" through staffers.
- **Evaluate outreach efforts after a meeting.** Determining what worked and what didn't helps assure that future meetings will be more effective. When participants see that the agency has improved its process, their enthusiasm is renewed. Reviewing attendance lists can help track individual interests. The Portland Metro, with attendance of over 300 people at meetings, evaluates its outreach program every three years.
- **Maintain interest through follow-up.** When people know their presence has been appreciated, they feel more inclined to continue with the process. Follow-up includes thank-you letters, reports, phone calls, surveys, and distribution of new information. For invited participants, courtesy dictates a thank-you note. Written responses are also appropriate to follow up unanswered questions or unresolved issues.
- **Target key individuals for special invitation to the next meeting.** Participants who are active in the community should be encouraged to attend and bring neighbors. This not only generates good will by showing respect for their role in the community, it also has a rippling effect within their sphere of influence.
- **Court press coverage and establish good media relations.** Agency community relations staff usually knows which reporters have transportation issues as their "beat." Feeding them choice bits of news and keeping them up-to-date helps assure they will cover the story well and in a timely fashion. On the other hand, agencies should avoid blanketing them with material. Timing is all. The Wisconsin DOT maintains relations with 600–800 media outlets and gets stories in the press prior to meetings. The Portland Metro takes out eye-catching ads, and the Cape Cod Commission gets a newspaper article "almost every day." In Minnesota, the Twin Cities MPO has a two-pronged media strategy: one focused on its region's editorial boards, another on reporters.
- **Employ radio coverage as a cost-effective alternative** to reach broad segments of the public. Paid ads, public service announcements (PSAs), and spot interviews can make more people aware of a transportation effort and call attention to upcoming meetings. The Montana DOT arranged interviews at local radio stations before its long-range plan meetings. The Minnesota

DOT developed call-in shows and later distributed tapes to cable stations. The tapes were played repeatedly, thus reaching a wider audience, and a comment number was listed at the end of the tape.

### **Who leads the effort?**

**In-house staff usually initiates these measures**, developing strategies and techniques for improving attendance and tailoring the approach to meet community needs as well as the project's particular demands. The Roanoke, Virginia, MPO assigns a staff person to devote the necessary time and energy to improving attendance. The Denver Transit Agency looks outside its engineering staff for meeting leaders who are skilled in describing technical issues in non-technical language.

**Community leaders or elected officials can suggest what works best in their communities**, advising an agency on key strategies and putting it in touch with others who are able to improve outreach. Agency credibility is often improved when a community leader conducts a meeting or introduces agency staff.

**Professional facilitators help create a fair, neutral atmosphere.** For complex or controversial issues, they help attract people who doubt they will otherwise be heard. They also contribute innovative ideas on how to increase subsequent participation. (See [Facilitation](#).)

### **What are the costs?**

**Costs depend on the number of people to be reached and the community's past involvement** with agency programs. Direct expenses include ads, graphics, visuals, mailings, translators if necessary, facility rental, and equipment. Staff costs are incurred to plan and implement a program, monitor progress, and make required adjustments. The level of time and energy staff must commit to a public involvement effort is closely linked to factors such as the complexity of the issues and the community's cultural heritage as well as its history of response to the agency. Costs may be significantly less for outreach to a community that has a well-established relationship with the agency.

### **What are the drawbacks?**

**Establishing credibility is difficult.** Agencies lacking a track record in participatory planning sometimes have difficulty establishing a process and convincing the public that efforts are sincere. Agencies that previously made "token" efforts without using the input to improve the plan or project may find it doubly hard to engage the community. A reputation for an honest commitment to involving the public is only built over time.

**Preparations to increase meeting attendance are time-consuming.** Personnel who are savvy about engaging the community in public involvement may be scarce. A trial-and-error period is sometimes needed to determine what works. Agency inaction, errors, and poor planning compound the difficulties of establishing credibility.

**Groups not traditionally involved in meetings are often hard to reach.** Ethnic, minority, and low-income communities may need extra contact and encouragement to keep them involved, since they often have more barriers to overcome. People who have been put off by an agency's insensitivity to their cultural heritage may be reluctant to participate again. (See [Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups](#).)

**A larger number of participants increases the challenge of building consensus.** Success in attracting more people places extra demands on staff, because more information must be prepared and transmitted. A wider array of opinion sometimes creates polarization or prolongs the process of

narrowing down alternatives to reach consensus. Agency staff needs to research potential issues and prepare focused agendas for meeting discussions.

**For further information:**

- Alaska Department of Transportation, Juneau, Alaska, (907) 465-2171
- Capital District Metropolitan Planning Organization, Albany, New York, (518) 458-2161
- Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, Seattle, Washington, (206) 684-1357
- Florida Department of Transportation, Tallahassee, Florida, (904) 488-8006
- Metropolitan Transit Authority of Harris County, Houston, Texas, (713) 739-4000
- Lawrence–Douglas County Metropolitan Planning Organization, Lawrence, Kansas, (913) 832-3153
- Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Los Angeles, California, (213) 922-2000
- Wisconsin Department of Transportation, Madison, Wisconsin, (608) 266-7744

## ROLE PLAYING

### What is role playing?

**In role playing, participants act out characters in a predefined “situation”** dealing with controversial aspects of transportation planning or project development. A role playing session is followed by an evaluation of the interaction and the statements made. At a recent conference of Federal agencies and private groups, participants took roles as members of groups competing for funds from the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). The range of groups included one arguing for a larger share for highways, another representing air quality environmentalists, and one speaking as a national cycling lobby seeking more money for bike paths.

**Role playing allows people to take risk-free positions** by acting out characters in hypothetical situations. It helps participants understand the range of concerns, values, and positions held by other people. It is sometimes called game simulation, simulations, simulated discussion, simulation games, and gaming. (See [Games and Contests](#).)

### Role playing has these components:

- A clearly defined and simple “situation” applicable to the problem or issue at hand;
- Written descriptions of the “roles” (characters) for participants to play;
- Goals to be accomplished during the session;
- A trained small-group leader/facilitator;
- Sufficient time for each participant to speak;
- An overall time limit for the session; and
- An evaluation period.

**Role playing encourages active participation** in confronting a situation. There is no script. Participants improvise how their characters might respond in the given situation and interact with the other characters.

**Role playing is also used to dramatize proposed changes.** In Hawaii, skits were used at an electronic town meeting to compare State funding for traditional industries with State help for new high-tech industries. Instead of the participants themselves assuming roles, a local improvisational acting company acted out several scenes, and viewers were then asked to react to issues raised by the role playing.

### Why is it useful?

**Role playing is an enlightening and interesting way to help people see a problem from another perspective.** It builds bridges between people, so they can appreciate the pressures and constraints faced by others. Rather than simply listening to speeches, people actively address the impacts of their decisions, actions, and positions on other people. Since statements made while playing a character are not binding on any participant, role playing facilitates involvement by engaging participants in a non-threatening process.

**In role playing, players become interactive.** They step out of their normal roles and into another role—often one that opposes their own goals and values. In this way, for example, an environmental activist and an industrial representative might change roles for purposes of the exercise. By presenting their own interpretation of how their characters would react, participants are often enlightened about the attitudes and behavior of others.

**Role playing shows how people stereotype others** and make judgments based on those stereotypes. The British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority used role playing to help measure attitudes toward

exportation of power. Participants opposed to exporting power assumed the role of an energy exporter and discussed the benefits of exportation. Then, each drew a picture of what he or she thought an energy exporter looked like. By being forced to show biases through role playing and graphic representations, participants could see how stereotypes cloud people's ability to be open to others' ideas.

### **Does it have special uses?**

**A common application of role playing is employee training.** As part of its Neighborhood Transit Services Workshops program, the Boston Transportation Department used role playing and other techniques to train staff in facilitation skills and responding to questions and comments. This enabled city staff to continue a program initially developed and conducted by consultants.

**Role playing helps when interaction among participants is needed** to break down barriers or reduce conflict or tension. Role playing jump-starts a lifeless group or helps people get to know each other at meetings or conferences. Role-playing exercises are particularly useful when groups have clearly defined positions that draw battle lines and limit communication.

**Role playing is also used to bring expert opinion to bear on a problem.** At a recent conference, a group of public involvement specialists participated in a role play that examined the needs of a power authority preparing a sustainable energy strategy. Through the role play—in which a wide range of interest groups, elected officials, and residents were portrayed—the expert group helped the power authority outline appropriate responses and involve the public better.

### **Who participates? And how?**

**A full range of representatives of community groups, interest groups, or key stakeholders can participate.** A broad array of positions should be represented. If groups are large, some participants may be teamed with others to allow greater participation. Participants who have difficulty acknowledging other interests, are unable to see the problem in context, or appear to be wedded to a particular position need particular encouragement to become engaged in the process.

**Role playing is usually best with informed participants,** since they already have some knowledge of the issues and the positions of the various parties. In any case, characters' positions and interests should be reasonably clear and well-defined. The Dallas Area Rapid Transit Authority (DART) used role playing with the general public during its bus planning efforts and with its advisory group for the South Oak Cliff Alternatives Analysis. DART found that the role-playing exercises were most productive when participants were informed community members and not simply "persons on the street."

**Agency staff also participate,** provided they do so on equal footing with community members. This helps staff to better understand the positions of participants and break down barriers between them and the community members with whom they need to interact.

**A trained leader describes the process orally.** Participants receive a written description of the situation, setting, and characters involved. The leader reads it aloud, sets time limits, gives examples of how responses might be presented, assigns roles, and begins the exercise. Each person speaks with the "voice" or viewpoint of his/her assigned character. As role playing progresses, time checks are helpful to keep participants focused and directed toward presenting their characters' full positions and reaching closure.

**Face-to-face contact is essential in role playing,** so chairs should be arranged around a table or in a circle. Props, such as hats or clothes, sometimes help people get into their roles. A newsprint pad and markers are useful to record comments during the evaluation period. Index cards or pads of paper encourage participants to make notes.

**Evaluation is essential** to the outcome. The trained leader initiates an engaging discussion with participants—one that focuses not only on the outcome but also on issues raised by participants, probing why various stands were taken and decisions made. Acting ability is irrelevant and may be discussed only in genial and friendly terms!

**Role playing is sometimes done spontaneously**, without a scripted situation or roles. In Santa Rosa, California, the city worked with community members on the impacts of discharging treated wastewater into the river. Through spontaneous role playing, with participants arguing on behalf of other people's preferences, the administration was able to understand better the public perception of wastewater discharge.

### **How do agencies use the output?**

**Agencies create stronger participation by building on the increased understanding of issues and positions** that result from role play. Role playing helps flesh out or clarify participants' opinions. They gain a clearer understanding of the planning or project development process, the multiple issues and interests that are involved, and the links between transportation and other areas like land use. Some alter their own perspectives on issues and potential solutions. Role playing also assists in negotiation and coalition building, where participants test potential consensus points.

### **Who leads role playing?**

**Role playing requires a trained leader** from within or outside the agency who is clear about the goals. This leader must be skilled at designing representative situations and scenarios that are applicable to the real-life situation. The leader should also be knowledgeable about areas of conflict and able to guide the group toward resolution. Finally, she or he must be able to lead the evaluation and engage participants in discussing the process, the lessons learned, and their relevance to real-world transportation issues.

### **What are the costs?**

**Costs tend to be high in terms of staffing.** If a trained leader is not available within the agency, a consultant knowledgeable about the issues needs to be hired for one or more days. Preparation time for developing the roles and the situation is extensive, depending on the complexity of the real-life problems. Even skilled consultants or staff require several dry runs and revision cycles to get the role play right. Agency staff sometimes finds that oversight of consultants is demanding in terms of time and energy to assure that they fully understand the issues to be covered. However, compared to other interactive processes—such as charrettes or workshops—that work on these different perspectives, role playing requires fewer staff resources, funds, and materials.

### **How is role playing organized?**

**Role playing is part of an ongoing process to develop cooperation among participants.** Trust among group members is essential: people are unlikely to fully participate if they do not know each other and have not developed a sense of mutual trust.

**Preparation includes developing a situation and roles**, inviting participants, determining the length of time for role playing, and making the setting conducive to the event. Effective role-playing games are relatively small, involving between 7 and 15 people.

**Community representatives can be consulted** to sound out the idea, work on characters, and help determine whose participation might bring out specific issues. Such consultation helps assure that role

playing is well-integrated with the larger process. Advance notice and consultation mitigate distrust and questioning of motives.

**Establishing clear and achievable goals is critical.** Goals might include resolving a conflict, increasing awareness of various perspectives, looking at familiar issues in different ways, and bridging gaps among participants and with the agency.

**A time limit is usually imposed,** but the atmosphere should be light and friendly.

**Observers or non-players may be invited to follow the action** and participate in the evaluation period. Agencies may observe the proceedings first-hand for information to help an overall process of planning or developing a project. However, observers dampen enthusiastic participation or cause resentment if they are viewed as having unexpressed or reserved opinions that are not addressed during the role playing.

### How is it used with other techniques?

**Role playing is part of a more extensive involvement process.** It is used to broaden understanding of an issue early in the process. It is used with board or computer games that simulate situations and require people to step into another “pair of shoes.” (See [Games and Contests](#); [Computer Presentations and Simulations](#).) It is used when people from different walks of life are all working on a common project.

**Role playing is used as an ice-breaker** at regular committee meetings. If participants’ thinking is changed through role playing, they are more likely to accept opinions about a variety of issues. As a result, later public involvement efforts are easier and more productive. Participants come to see that their opponents’ views can also change. Role playing also spices up an otherwise dull topic by creating characters with humorous names that allude to their roles (for example, “Douglas Fir,” representing the Forest Service).

### What are the drawbacks?

**Role playing requires significant time and skills,** primarily for preparing scenarios and roles, taking dry runs, and conducting the exercise. A consultant can be expensive, particularly when briefing is needed. This expense, however, is offset by time savings in reaching an understanding of the problems and constraints. A consultant may also train agency staff people to plan and conduct future role playing sessions on their own.

**Participants may be uncomfortable** playing roles that negate their true feelings. The leader must provide reassurance, support, and suggestions.

**The outcome is unpredictable,** even with a strong leader. Although the action can go in an unplanned direction, a trained leader can step in and refocus the session. In addition, an unpredicted outcome may bring up new issues that have not yet been considered.

**Lack of enthusiasm or minimal participation occurs if the motive or sincerity of the agency is questioned.** Agencies enhance the chances of success by involving participants in planning the role play, conducting the session early in the process, and providing clear direction and strong leadership. Agencies need to show the links between the role playing and participation in the real issues and decisions at stake.

**For further information:**

- British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority, (604) 623-3629
- Dallas Area Rapid Transit District, (214) 749-2543
- Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, (617) 222-5000
- Surface Transportation Policy Project, (202) 939-3470

## SITE VISITS

### What are site visits?

**Site visits are trips taken by community residents, officials, agencies, and consultants** to proposed or actual project areas, corridors, impacted areas, or affected properties. They are also known as field visits or site tours.

**Site visits are made in a variety of ways**—by bus, train, taxi, private car, or on foot. Some involve long-distance trips by air.

### Why are they useful?

**Site visits show the physical environment of a proposal.** They are used by local people to show engineers, agency personnel, and planners details and conditions they might have missed. Frequently, site visits are the best way to demonstrate a physical fact to either the community or agency personnel.

**Site visits give participants a common frame of reference.** They see conditions at the same time and under the same circumstances. The Connecticut Department of Transportation (DOT) organized a bus tour of New Haven's Q Bridge area so the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) could see the existing bridge, potential new rights-of-way, and sensitive neighboring areas. The tour included agency staff, community people, and consultants.

**Site visits help people understand each other's point-of-view.** Residents, officials, and agency staff stand on the street, observe where a proposed project would be, and locate it on a plan. This helps people understand how agency plans translate into reality. Site visits are valuable as a basis for repeated discussions and as details are developed.

**Site visits help get people to participate who normally would not be involved** or may be uncomfortable working with agencies. The field office personnel for Denver's light rail transit project conducted walking tours of the corridor for neighborhood residents, many of whom had never been involved in a planning or construction project.

**A site visit is a chance for agency staff to better understand a proposal** and hear the perspective of others. Engineers and other staff find an informal, risk-free opportunity for communication with the community.

**Site visits improve media coverage and accuracy of reporting,** on occasions when the media are involved. A reporter who devotes several hours to a site visit is more likely to understand and write clearly about complex, subtle issues and planning details. (See [Media Strategies](#).)

**Site visits help gain credibility for the agency by going into the community.** They help dispel the notion that agencies do not understand the area or people they will affect. They show that an agency is willing to listen to community concerns.

### Do they have special uses?

**Site visits help people understand a particular technology.** Visits are made on buses, transit lines, roads, or other forms of transportation to illustrate the operations, problems, and advantages of a specific mode. In Denver, the transit agency put a light rail transit vehicle on display to let people see what it was like and walk through it.

**Trips to the site are useful to address new questions as they arise.** Participants helping to develop the Central Artery North Area project in Boston's Charlestown neighborhood had difficulty understanding the dimensions of a park proposed for the top of the depressed highway. Going to the site on a low-traffic morning, agency staff outlined the proposed new parcel on the ground with lime. With a rooftop view of the outlined space, participants were able to appreciate the new park's size. The community newspaper carried a feature on the visit to help local people grasp the enormity of the parcel.

**Site visits are sometimes tours to locations similar to the proposed site.** Cities contemplating new rail systems have sent delegations to cities where such systems already exist. During these visits, meetings were arranged between the delegation and agency officials, community people, and the business community. For Denver's light rail transit project, community groups visited light rail transit systems in Portland and Vancouver.

### **Who participates? And how?**

**Anyone can participate (as long as the site is accessible).** Site visits are sometimes targeted to advisory committee representatives, elected officials, neighborhood activists and local residents, environmentalists, or the business community. People from the disability community may have difficulty visiting a site with rough topography. (See [People with Disabilities](#).)

**Site visits help local people make a particular point about a proposal,** especially if they feel the agency does not understand the point. In Sioux City, Iowa, planning for Vision 2020 planning started with a citywide bus tour for its Task Force to provide an overview of the physical attributes of the city. Task Force members were able as a group to view issues in all parts of the city. Agency staff thought the trip was invaluable as an overview of local concerns.

**Information about the site visit is distributed widely to potentially participants.** Information is sent out in meeting notices or as fliers. Notices are mailed to active participants in the process and placed in local newspapers or on signs in local stores or activity centers. (See [Public Information Materials](#).)

**A special invitation helps draw specific participants.** An agency may target certain people because of their concerns or issues. In these instances, a special written invitation or phone call helps. A follow-up letter or notice also helps draw special participants.

**Tours can be organized.** For Boston's Central Artery/Tunnel, the project offered a series of walking tours. Notices were sent to a variety of organizations, and the public was invited. Bus or train tours may be an appropriate way to include a large group. In special instances, air tours are useful. For people unable to attend, a video tour is a good alternative. Videos are also used in meetings to help participants remember site details. (See [Video Techniques](#).)

**Community residents request a site visit** so they can point out specific issues and make sure the agency understands their concerns. A community coalition asked the Massachusetts Secretary of Transportation, the transit authority's General Manager, and project planners to tour a corridor being studied for transit improvements.

### **How do agencies use site visits?**

**Site visits are useful to show how a facility or plan would operate** or fit into its surroundings. In preparation for a major investment study, the Maryland Transit Authority used tours to show how its existing light rail line operates. Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) took neighborhood associations on site visits to show that proposed technologies and operations were being used elsewhere. Inviting media representatives on site visits results in better-informed reporting and editorializing. (See [Media Strategies](#).)

**Agencies use site visits to better understand the physical environment**, make better-informed decisions, and clarify conflicting positions on particular physical points, such as sources of background noise levels or distances between buildings and proposed tracks.

### **Who leads site visits?**

**A site visit must be led by experienced, knowledgeable staff** who know the area and the issues. The staff must communicate the issues in a non-judgmental and open-minded way, so that participants feel the trip is a worthwhile learning experience.

**A community representative can lead a site visit.** The leader should not be biased or present only one side of the story. Since other community groups have different perspectives, such bias could be divisive.

**A high agency official or an elected official may lead a site visit**, particularly for high-profile, controversial projects. Community members may feel that top officials are the most appropriate leaders for such projects.

### **What are the costs?**

**Costs vary.** Transportation costs are high for long-distance visits requiring extensive arrangements. Costs were a significant factor when community representatives from Burlington, Vermont, along with agency staff, considered traveling by air to see the Portland, Oregon, light rail installation.

**The costs of staff time vary.** Staff time costs relatively little for local site visits but could involve several days for more distant trips.

**Agencies can provide food**, especially if the visit is lengthy or if extended discussion is planned. Light snacks and beverages convey an informal message and encourage people to stay and ask questions. In Dallas, DART always feeds participants during site visits.

**Site visits can be photographed or taped.** A camera records information such as how close a building is to the street. Photos or videos of the gathering are informative for other people, the staff, or the media. A video camera helps record the details raised by local people, as well as interchanges between community members and agency personnel.

### **How are site visits organized?**

**Agency staff contacts community group leaders** to see if there is interest in a site visit. If there is, staff should ask for names of potential invitees and compile an invitation list. If the list is short, the agency can ask invitees if they feel comfortable opening the visit to a wider audience by listing it in local newspapers, posting notices in public places, or sending a notice to an entire mailing list.

**Community people can ask an agency to conduct a site visit.** Agency staff inquires about the goals of the visit, the agency personnel who should be present, and others who should attend. It is important to work together in setting an appropriate date, time, and other logistics to demonstrate cooperation and assure participation.

**Site visits are held at convenient times**, such as evenings or weekends. These times should be selected in conjunction with the community. They should also be selected so that site conditions are not obscured by equipment or bad lighting. It is preferable to hold a site visit during the time the site is most active or when the site represents a condition that people are concerned about.

**A meeting can be added to a site visit if the logistics are feasible.** It is helpful to discuss what people saw while impressions are fresh. A formal meeting on-site requires distinctive planning. Details such as chairs, lights, and weather must be considered. If an agency wants an on-site meeting, it should get agreement from the community.

**The agency supplies transportation,** if required. It is important that the vehicle be comfortable. People should be able to hear the leader or any discussions clearly.

**Descriptive materials are provided before the visit,** including a summary of the proposal, the purpose of the visit, specific characteristics to look for, etc. Maps and materials may be needed to explain major elements of the proposal. In Dallas, DART shows a site video beforehand and provides written materials in advance.

**Generally, participants gather in one location and leave together for the site.** Occasionally, participants gather at the site itself. A definite arrival time is set, since an opening explanation is crucial and helps the group work together; the informality of learning together helps break down factions within the group.

**The organizer of the visit may lead it.** It can be conducted as a walk or drive around the site. The visit should be narrated, so that participants are aware of where the proposal affects the land. Time should be allowed for discussion of each area and for a question-and-answer period as the group goes along and at the end of the site visit.

**Viewpoints from all participants are heard during the visit.** The agency makes sure each participant can view and react to the site and the proposal. Direct input is solicited.

**Summing-up should be done promptly.** Participants may gather and discuss what they experienced. A written record should be prepared, including a list of participants, items to investigate further, and areas in which there was agreement and disagreement.

### **How are they used with other techniques?**

**CACs are good candidates for site visits.** CAC members can be selected from visit participants. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).) The San Francisco Citizens' Planning Committee took site visits to joint developments in other communities. During the Hudson waterfront transit alternatives analysis in New Jersey, CAC members toured potential air quality monitoring sites.

**A site visit can be a first step in another technique** such as a charrette. (See [Charrettes](#).) Computer simulations are more accurate and credible if site visits are incorporated. (See [Computer Presentations and Simulations](#).)

**Site visits with media involved are important parts of media strategies.** Newsletter articles highlighting site visits and incorporating photos and diagrams demonstrate agency efforts in public involvement by reporting the trip to many people. (See [Media Strategies; Public Information Materials](#).)

### **What are the drawbacks?**

**Organizing a visit and getting appropriate people there is a challenge.** Coordinating schedules, weather, and transportation requires considerable effort and staff time.

**Site visits may need to be repeated several times** for a large project. Despite careful planning, they may fall flat due to weather or other conditions over which the staff has no control. A trip to a proposed

site may cause later problems in recollection if viewed on a day when weather is an aberration or if part of the site is inaccessible.

**A site visit fails if staff cannot answer questions** or are poorly prepared. The community may feel its time is wasted if it seems the agency is not listening or is defensive.

**The costs of a visit to a distant location are often prohibitive.** Airplane, train, or bus group travel to other cities may be beyond an agency's budget.

**For further information:**

- Bay Area Rapid Transit District, San Francisco, California, (510) 464-6172
- Burlington, Vermont, (801) 658-3004
- Central Artery North Area Project, Massachusetts Highway Department, (617) 973-7000
- Connecticut DOT, Newington, Connecticut, (860) 594-2000
- Dallas Area Regional Transit, Dallas, Texas, (214) 749-2581
- Denver Regional Transit District, Denver, Colorado, (303) 299-2401
- Siouxland Interstate Metropolitan Planning Committee, Sioux City, Iowa, (712) 279-6344

## NON-TRADITIONAL MEETING PLACES AND EVENTS

### What are non-traditional meeting places and events?

**These are locations that are not the usual meeting hall or public building** where many participation events are traditionally held. These non-traditional options include shopping centers, elderly drop-in centers, county fairs, neighborhood fairs and block parties, and sporting events. Traditional places such as schools, town halls, board rooms, and libraries do have benefits. Space in these buildings is readily available and inexpensive to operate. They are usually central to the community and the neighborhoods and can be perceived as neutral in a socially polarized area. However, to reach people who don't typically participate, an agency needs to go to where they congregate and feel comfortable—in other words, to their own turf.

**Many non-traditional meeting places are within the local community** and enable an agency to achieve a wider range of public contact. When these meeting site options are used, community access is easier and people's interest is heightened. By choosing non-traditional community locations and events, an agency shows its sincere interest in involving community people and tailoring participation opportunities to their needs.

### Why are they useful?

**Unusual locations help agencies increase attendance.** Sites may be physical locations or events open to the public. Transportation agencies have used the following non-traditional locations and events to attract new and different participants to the transportation planning process:

- **Shopping malls attract large numbers of people.** The New Jersey Department of Transportation (DOT) used suburban shopping malls for events and meetings during development of its statewide long-range transportation plan. Activities included videos, mini-focus groups, children's activities, and staff assistance at presentations. (See [Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks; Games and Contests](#).)
- **Agricultural fairs are good locations for exhibits.** The Vancouver Intergovernmental Resource Center had a booth for 10 days at the Washington State Fair. Using interactive video games, the transit authority took an educational approach to issues of air quality, congestion, and alternative modes. Video games were a hit with all age groups, especially children. The Los Angeles, California, Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) staffed a mock-up transit car at a booth at the county fair for 28 days. The Idaho DOT staffed a booth at the East Idaho Fair with 2 people on 2 shifts per day for 9 days.
- **Neighborhood fairs and events help in distributing information.** The Sioux City, Iowa, Siouxland Interstate Metropolitan Planning Committee had an information booth at a local festival. The Houston–Galveston Area Council staffed several information booths each week to provide information on-site at community events.
- **Local buildings and events are good locations for agency contact.** New Jersey Transit has sponsored meetings at a Portuguese social club, a State museum oriented to children, a suburban senior citizen center, and a work site at Port Elizabeth.
- **Community sports events are good places to meet and talk with people.** As part of a major investment study, the Missouri Highway and Transportation Agency set up displays in a tent inside the gate at a community football game. People were encouraged to stop by, ask questions, and fill out a survey form.

- **Special neighborhood events help agencies reach people.** Displays or mini-meetings may be held in conjunction with career days, block parties, house meetings, bus trips, or local community festivities.
- **Centrally-located, convenient places may be used to distribute agency information.** Local libraries are a good place for viewing community displays and are often used to make project environmental documents available locally. Public parks have been used for large meetings and for events where transportation agencies can participate.

**Agencies reach individuals who usually do not participate.** At new sites and places commonly visited by the public, an agency distributes information to a large population it ordinarily would not reach. People may be directly contacted who do not ordinarily come to public buildings or participate in agency meetings.

**Agencies receive a wider array of comments from more people.** With greater community awareness about a new process, more people are encouraged to participate in meetings associated with it. Georgia DOT uses “greeters” to welcome participants at its open houses and instructs staff to help.

**An agency’s credibility is enhanced by new approaches.** By bringing a meeting into a community, an agency shows its concern and desire to obtain local comments. Highway public hearings are traditionally held near the site proposed for improvement—for instance, in high school auditoriums. But many planning and project development meetings can also benefit participants by using local sites at convenient times, since many members of the public are not free to attend during business hours. For its statewide plan, the Massachusetts Highway Department held open houses in numerous community facilities around the State.

### Do they have special uses?

**Specific sites in a community can be targeted.** Instead of requiring people to travel to agency offices, sites can be chosen that are central to neighborhoods. This is particularly important if neighborhoods are defined by specific ethnic, minority, or other underrepresented groups. (See [Ethnic, Minority, and Low-income Groups](#).)

**Using project sites for meetings helps the public understand technical issues.** As one non-traditional way to hold meetings, a visit to a project location or a tour of an alignment provides first-hand experience to help people envision a plan or project. (See [Site Visits](#).) To obtain public input, the Ada Planning Association in Boise, Idaho, set up an outdoor task force meeting in a public park, where a pedestrian crossing bridge was proposed. A direct viewing of the physical site, along with displays and maps, helped people understand the technical design of the proposed improvement.

**Non-traditional sites help an agency reach specific target groups.** The Kansas DOT met at local sites for regional meetings with business and industry in developing its long-range plan. The Maricopa Association of Governments in Phoenix, Arizona, developed two types of meetings at local sites, one for business leaders and key community leaders and the other for the general public.

**Specific modes can be used as a focus for meetings.** The Denver, Colorado, Regional Transit District (RTD) invited people to one major investment study meeting held on a trolley. During Miami’s East–West Major Investment Study (MIS), the Florida DOT invited elementary and middle-school students to tour the existing system and encourage their parents to participate in the decision-making by attending meetings. During its rail transit alternatives analysis/draft environmental impact statement/draft environmental impact report process, the Los Angeles MTA offered a walking tour or a ride on a passenger rail car inside the proposed construction area to explain the operation and construction process and gain input on proposed mitigation measures.

**Sites or events that attract large numbers of people are especially useful.** There is increasing interest in taking agency work to “where the people are.” By going to where people congregate in large numbers, an agency takes advantage of a pre-existing audience. Non-traditional sites draw crowds a public meeting rarely does. Shopping centers attract people in such numbers that an agency may not need to publicize its presence.

### **Who participates? And how?**

**People are usually invited to participate informally.** In unusual locations, agencies often must get the attention of passers-by through attractive displays that compete with other activities at the site. The displays encourage people to visit, get information, and give an agency their views and comments. However, a meeting in a special place can also be directed beyond individuals through notices and invitations to a general audience or a mixture of representatives from community groups.

**Participants usually visit the site for a meeting or for browsing** through an exhibit. At a booth or display, they view exhibits or talk to a staff person. At a project site, people get information from the surroundings as well as from agency displays, brochures, and presentations. Depending on the location and the type of meeting or display, they give comments on agency work.

### **How do agencies use the output?**

**Agencies need to consider how to document comments for use as input to decisions.** Comments recorded in writing by participants or staff bring new insights or considerations to a plan or project. But the informality of the situation may make it difficult for passers-by to write their comments, particularly if they have children with them or if there is no convenient place to sit and write. In such cases, recording oral comments on tape for later transcription is one option. Another is providing comment forms that can be filled out at home and mailed to the agency.

### **Who leads?**

**Agency staff people are most likely to lead non-traditional events.** If informal presentations are required, agency staff or consultants may handle them. Project management staff led a trolley tour for the Denver, Colorado, Regional Transportation District and the Houston, Texas, Transit Alternatives Analysis/ Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

**Non-traditional meetings are also led by community residents.** The Boise, Idaho, MPO asks members of its civic advisory committee (CAC) to host and lead non-traditional meetings. CAC members meet with civic organizations and attend neighborhood events to speak on the long-range plan and how people can become actively involved in it. The community perspective helps participants understand an agency’s work. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).)

**Community residents can assist agency participation in non-traditional events.** Familiar neighborhood faces encourage other neighbors to ask questions and participate. Community members can work jointly with agency personnel in staffing exhibits. (See [Speakers’ Bureaus and Public Involvement Volunteers](#).)

### **What do they cost?**

**Costs vary.** If only the place is changed, costs are likely to be reasonably low. Labor-intensive events are expensive. One-day events may require two agency representatives to staff a booth and field questions from community residents.

**Staff people are not always required at special exhibits.** Although it is useful for them to be on hand, they are necessary only if large crowds or many questions are anticipated. If an issue is especially controversial or complex, it is best to have staff accompany the exhibit. Otherwise, the display can include telephone numbers to contact for further information.

**Costs climb for lengthy events** such as State fairs. The Los Angeles MTA needed 25 people to staff a county fair booth that operated from 10:00 A.M. to midnight for 28 days.

**Operational costs are incurred.** Staff time, space rentals, equipment, event scheduling, graphics, advertising in newspapers, videos, and VCRs are possible cost elements. For bus tours, there may be rental fees. The local transit authority donated the use of the bus for the Boise, Idaho, MPO bus tour.

### **How are they organized?**

**An agency defines the objectives for the event.** The agency's public involvement goals guide in selecting the site and format. Staff may brainstorm ideas to flesh out the format. Community leaders and groups with experience at sites such as fairs are good sources of advice.

**Sites that are open at convenient hours raise attendance.** Non-traditional times for meetings may help people schedule time to attend. Special evening or weekend hours are frequently used to appeal to people who are unable to attend meetings or exhibits during regular working hours or weekdays. The Metropolitan Council of the Twin Cities area of Minnesota is transforming certain meetings into open houses where people can come and go according to their own schedules. (See [Open Forum Hearings/Open Houses](#).)

**Agencies increase participation by informing the local media** of an event and its schedule. For certain events, it is appropriate to work with others who are in charge of publicity.

**Exhibits, format, and coordination of staff are instrumental** in a successful event at an unusual site. Participation in seasonal events such as State or county fairs sometimes requires reservations months in advance. Securing the availability of a facility ahead of schedule ensures better preparation and organization.

**Agencies choose the most appropriate method of providing information.** A wide variety of methods are available to use in unconventional sites:

- **Booths or tables are used to give and get information.** These booths are staffed, if possible, so people can talk with agency representatives. These conversations can explain agency goals and elicit community comments.
- **Kiosks also offer a method of both giving and getting information.** Interactive displays can provide information people may find useful. Displays can also be set up to record comments or survey customer attitudes. The Colorado DOT has used interactive touch screens in shopping centers. (See [Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks](#).)
- **Props help stimulate dialogue in non-traditional meeting places.** In preparing its long-range transportation plan, the East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission used props such as renderings, photos, engineering designs, and videos to help participants visualize scenarios of managed growth, maximized density, and minimized infrastructure development. Videos and slides were used at local sites in the process of preparing a long-range transportation plan for the Little Rock, Arkansas, Metroplan. For the Eastside Corridor Alternatives Analysis/Draft Environmental Impact Statement/Draft Environmental Impact Report process, the Los Angeles MTA placed the alternatives in color and on small (11" x 17") boards, which were easy to carry and pass around at meetings. Participants could hold the boards at close range and discuss them at length.

- **Videos may be shown at special sites** or lent for wide distribution. They outline issues, define the need for participation, and set the stage for a meeting. They can be re-run at meetings as a basis for discussions. The Wisconsin DOT uses videos at meetings to explain a project's goals for the coming years, along with materials or resource people who are available for questions. (See [Interactive Video Displays and Kiosks](#).)
- **Portable exhibits can take the place of staff** and still enhance the distribution of agency information. An agency prepares stand-alone visuals for displays to bring information to new groups of people to broaden participation. These visuals include boards, photographs, renderings, kiosks, interactive displays, videos, or maps. Portable exhibits are set up in public buildings, malls, or other locations where they can be read by passers-by. It is important to find locations where a display can be monitored by security officials, so that it will not be defaced or destroyed.
- **Mobile exhibits can be mounted inside a vehicle** used to travel around a State or region. With permission, it can be stationed at nearly any location, including malls, universities, or local public buildings. The Arizona DOT uses a mobile facility to inform the public in sparsely-populated areas. The Washington, D.C., MPO used a "vision van" to publicize its visioning effort and gather survey information.

**Informality aids in attracting people to agency events or displays in any setting** and is particularly important at non-traditional sites. Displays or events that allow one-on-one interaction are less intimidating for people who tend to shy away from meetings in traditional locations. Informality also helps a transportation agency's message and materials become "part of the landscape" rather than an intrusion into community territory.

**Technical descriptions are not usually required.** Unconventional sites fit with non-technical explanations. Discussing engineering concepts or environmental impacts in ordinary terms is challenging to staff but rewarding in terms of improved public understanding of agency goals.

**Evaluation of the success of unusual events aids future outreach efforts.** Agencies need to carefully assess how variable factors such as time of day, location, access by public transportation, or nature of the event affected its impact, so that future planning can capitalize on those that contributed to its success and avoid those that detracted from it.

#### How are they used with other techniques?

**Non-traditional meetings and exhibits supplement other public involvement programs.** Different locations with special props spark new interest in active community people or attract new participants into an outreach meeting. At new sites, charrettes, focus groups, or visioning may be used as lead-ins to discussing complex issues. (See [Charrettes; Focus Groups; Visioning](#).) CACs may want to travel to new sites for their meetings. (See [Civic Advisory Committees](#).)

#### What are the drawbacks?

**Staffing can be expensive.** Staff and equipment costs climb for long events, such as State fairs that last 10 days or more. Props, videos, and interactive computers require on-site technical assistance to set up equipment.

**Unusual meeting sites and approaches may be intimidating to potential participants,** especially groups not traditionally involved in the decision-making process. An agency needs special effort to gain their confidence and participation.

**Weather conditions are a factor in selecting an unusual meeting site.** A rain date may need to be scheduled for outdoor meetings. The East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission avoids outdoor meetings during the summer when air conditioning is more comfortable.

**The number of exhibits to be displayed may be restricted at a new site** because of space limitations. Agencies may not have all the exhibits necessary to answer a specific question thoroughly. The Denver, Colorado, RTD experienced exhibit limitations because it could not bring all the visuals and boards to a meeting on the trolley.

**People may not be interested in interactive displays.** The Florida DOT turned proposed interactive mall and turnpike plaza events into “exhibits only” when they realized passengers were, in general, not interested in getting detailed information while stopping at commercial centers on the turnpike. Another State DOT reports that while many people passed by and casually looked at its displays at a State fair, the staff doubted that many viewers were really engaged or gleaned much from the experience. An agency needs to carefully define its objectives in choosing unusual venues and design its presence to accomplish worthwhile aims that justify the costs and the effort.

**Popular exhibits often require extra preparation.** Los Angeles MTA’s Metro Red Line display cars have been an attractive feature at many community events. Preparations to display the cars required months of advanced notice to responsible MTA departments.

**Varying meeting locations makes it difficult to maintain continuity** and build on previous meetings. Interested stakeholders may lose interest if special efforts replace a known meeting pattern.

#### **Are non-traditional meetings and events flexible?**

**Meetings sites vary, and events are tailored to specific sites.** Agencies can determine whether to staff a booth or exhibit throughout an exhibition period, which varies from one day to more than a week. Flexibility is required if events are rescheduled due to weather conditions.

**Traveling workshops offer the flexibility of a “pick up and go” presentation.** Moving from one location to another on short notice is sometimes an advantage and makes materials more accessible to the general public.

#### **When are they used most effectively?**

**Non-traditional meetings are effective when they coincide with pre-existing events.**

**Non-traditional meeting places help remote populations.** People from rural areas are able to attend meetings that are not otherwise easily accessible. If meeting access for rural people is difficult or time-consuming, it is preferable to offer a multi-purpose stop such as an annual State or county fair.

**Non-traditional events are important prior to major milestones.** A series of events or exhibits before major decisions on projects or plans garners input from people who may not attend regular community meetings.

#### **For further information:**

- Ada Planning Association (APA), Boise, Idaho, (208) 345-5274
- Dallas Area Rapid Transit, Dallas, Texas, (214) 658-6112
- Denver Regional Transit District, Denver, Colorado, (303) 299-2401
- East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, (414) 751-4770

- Florida State Department of Transportation, Miami East–West Field Office, Miami, Florida, (305) 262-7033
- Kentuckiana Regional Planning and Development Agency, Kentucky, (502) 266-6084
- Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Los Angeles, California, (213) 244-6891
- Maricopa Association of Governments, Phoenix, Arizona, (602) 254-6308
- Missouri Highway and Transportation Department, Jefferson City, Missouri, (314) 751-1685